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ABSTRACT

This report describes the Scarsdale, New York, Public Schools' mentor program for beginning teachers from the perspective of its second year (1986-87). In response to the challenge to provide support for new teachers and to vitalize an experienced staff, a collaborative program was developed among the Scarsdale Teachers Association, district administration, and Teachers College, Columbia University. A joint committee solicits nominations for mentors from staff and administrator and pairs nominees with new teachers. The mentor role is open to tenured teachers who demonstrate significant competence and dedication. Twenty-nine mentors were operative during 1986-87. Mentors' responsibilities include an eight-session seminar and assisting the new teacher with schedules, orientation, and curriculum design. The pair meet at least one hour weekly. An orientation defines teachers' roles and stresses the relationship's nonevaluative and supportive nature. Year-long sessions involve instructional programs, community information, and professional growth. Beginning mentors attend seven two-hour sessions on values orientation and observation techniques. Most mentors give positive reports about sessions and professional growth opportunities. A stipend is available for second-year mentors. Administrators and faculty believe the investment has increased performance and productivity. To be successful, the program must maintain the achievements of greater teacher effectiveness and career satisfaction. (CJH)

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The Mentor Program in the Scarsdale Public Schools

American Association of School Administrators - Annual Convention

Successful Practices Session

February 20, 1987

Dr. Joan Weber

EA 019 275

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THE MENTOR PROGRAM IN THE SCARSDALE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Background/Rationale

Personnel issues for the 1980's appear to present paradoxical problems: On the one hand schools will continue to have experienced and aging staff members coupled with declining secondary enrollment. On the other hand, the increase in elementary enrollment and the renewed emphasis on secondary math, science and foreign languages, coupled with serving children with special needs (emotional, social and multicultural), will create opportunities for recently trained but inexperienced graduates. Moreover, schools must compete financially with private industry, corporations and the professions to attract outstanding personnel while simultaneously tightening entrance requirements. Schools must also contend with the fact that although the number of teacher graduates has decreased 53% in the last 10 years, teacher training programs of questionable quality have increased. A recent Metropolitan Life study, moreover, has indicated that 55% of those presently teaching said they would like to leave; indeed for every one person entering the profession, 12 leave. The statistics on the national level reveal that schools need 23% of all graduating classes from now until 1990 to fill anticipated vacancies. Presently, only 6.2% of college graduates go into teaching. To be competitive, therefore, Schools, will need to provide a broad spectrum of incentives to attract new teachers. Hence, the issues of recruitment, merit pay/career ladders, supervision and evaluation are intristic to any discussion which reviews preser personnel practices and plans for future needs of the school system.

The new wave of education reports, especially from The Carnegie Forum on

Education and the Economy (A Nation Prepared: The Report of the Task Force on Teaching as a Profession) and the Holmes Group, focus on the nature and conditions of the teaching profession. They call for a fundamental reorganization of the schools in order to make teaching a more attractive profession to qualified individuals. As we know, the reports propose that we:

- re-define teacher preparation and certification programs
- re-examine the organization of schools and the allocation of resources with an eye to restructuring and reconfiguring the present classroom arrangement
- provide opportunities for shared governance through collaborative decision-making while holding schools accountable for the results of those decisions
- improve conditions in the workplace, and provide for more autonomy
- create differentiated roles and responsibilities with commensurate training, supervision and compensation... to name a few issues

These national issues have been addressed in Scarsdale both in discussion and actions. The issues become all the more important when seen in the light of the demographics of our staff: The demographic picture in Scarsdale is consistent with national trends — about 1/4 of the 312 staff members is elizible to retire. It is an older, highly experienced staff hired in the growth years of the 1950's and 1960's. The average age of our teachers is 46.5 years. 56.8% are at the top salary step. During the past three years this staff has begun to change primarily due to an increase in annual retirements. In the last three years we have had an average of 16 retirements each year and have hired an average of 25 teachers new to the district in each of these three years. Thus,

the composition of our staff is changing dramatically with relatively new staff members comprising 20% of the total faculty.

The Development of the Program

Given this challenge - to recruit qualified teachers and develop programs to initiate these teachers into the school system while providing opportunities to revitalize an experienced staff - a unique collaborative effort was developed between the Scarsdale Teachers Association, the Administration of the Scarsdale Public Schools, and Teachers College, Columbia University.

Since many staff members and school administrators believe that pervasive change is necessary to successfully attract and retain qualified teachers for an outstanding educational program, we have begun to create professionally rewarding new roles for teachers. Moreover, the District has had a long standing tradition of addressing these issues through joint teacher/administration committees. While our local school district sought ways to improve the profession of teaching, the University was seeking ways to develop a professional support system for beginning teachers. The collaborative effort between the Scarsdale Public Schools and Teachers College added an important dimension to the program and is illustrative of a local school-university partnership to improve the profession of teaching.

The Current Program

This is the second year of the Mentor Program and it continues under the direction of the Joint Committee. This committee, in consultation with principals, solicits nominations for mentors from staff, supervisors and

principals and then pairs the mentor nominees with the new teachers. Presently, the mentor teacher's role is open to all tenured teachers who demonstrate a high degree of competence, dedication and accomplishment. For the 1986-87 school year we have 29 mentors of whom 4 are mentoring for a second time. In reviewing the first year's program we discovered the following:

- that we needed to start the program earlier, before school opens;
- that while some mentor/mentee relationships were natural pairings, others were strained;
- that those mentoring out of their subject area or grade were not as successful, but that new teachers still benefited from the socialization process;
- that both new teachers and mentors profited most if they were teaching the same grade and subject;
- that classroom proximity was important;
- and that it was especially useful to have the mentor and the teacher new to the district in the same building because the climate, routines and procedures are different in each school.

In general, our first year problems concerned schedules, routines, time for planning and discussion, concerns about peer observation and a reluctance on the part of the new teachers to ask for help.

In addition to attending the required eight session mentor seminar, the responsibilities of the mentor to the new teacher include assistance with schedules and parent conferences, curriculum design and selection, classroom organization and management, and orientation to school procedures. The mentor

assists with a myriad of other things as well, including introduction to other staff members and acculturation to the norms and mores of the building and the District.

The mentor and the teacher new to the district are required to meet at least on hour per week, but generally meet more often — at lunch, before school, after school or during preparation periods. The District has provided two days of released time but the days have not been utilized thus far.

This year the program began in late August prior to the opening of school with one and a half days devoted to an Orientation Session for both new teachers and mentors. During this time the mentors met with the Seminar Director to define the role and responsibilities of the mentor to the new teacher and to establish and stress that the relationship is non-evaluative and emphasizes peer support; while simultaneously, the teachers new to the Scarsdale School System participated in an Orientation Program designed specifically to assist them in learning about the District.

The Orientation Program, under the direction of the Director of Personnel with the resources of the Scarsdale Teachers Institute, gave the teachers new to the district an opportunity to meet their principals, all central office administrators, learn about district-wide programs and tackle the morass of paper work. It also gave the new teacher a chance to socialize and enjoy a festive luncheon with board members, administrators, colleagues and mentors. The second day of the Orientation Program began with breakfast for both mentors and new teachers, and was followed by a workshop on classroom strategies.

Thereafter, the new teachers met with principals and department heads in their own buildings and those discussions focused on building orientation and classroom organization. We found the Orientation Program essential to a smooth entry into the District, largely by creating a supportive atmosphere essential for success.

In addition to the Orientation Program for the new faculty and the mentoring sessions, several workshops have been held for the new teachers throughout the year. They included sessions on:

- Instructional Programs and Support Services within the District
- Health Insurance
- Resources and Information about the Scarsdale Community
- Professional Growth Opportunities
- New Teacher Exchange Sessions (which give the New Teachers an opportunity to meet with one another, share experiences and evaluate the program.)

The Mentor/Seminar

While the mentors provided the support and encouragement to new faculty members they needed to acquire knowledge and skills to make them more effective in their new roles. In addition to a session prior to the opening of school, 7 two hour sessions are required of first year mentors. The seminar sessions focus on values orientation; they emphasize differences in perspectives as they relate to teaching (through role playing and case studies); they discusse techniques of observation and conferencing and distinguish the mentor role from the supervisory role. The design of the seminar continues to be driven by the

emerging needs of the participants and will continue to change with the complexion, attitudes and inclinations of each mentor group.

Most of the mentors report that the course helped them in establishing a relationship with the new teacher/mentee, specifically — how to approach conferencing without being judgmental, how to use a variety of techniques to build relationships, and tactful ways of dealing with various interpersonal conflicts. When the mentors were asked what professional growth opportunities resulted from their mentoring the following responses were noted:

- Refocused on "what is good teaching"
- Presented an opportunity to get to know people accross the District.
- Provided the opportunity to understand other people's views.
- Helped re-evaluate one's own teaching style.
- Provided an opportunity to refocus on curriculum.
- Re-kindled sense of excitement.
- Provided insight on how students respond to different personalities and teaching styles.
- Encouraged pride in the place where you work.

Rewards and Compensation

As was noted, the program was designed to provide support and opportunity for professional growth through the required Seminar. Participants were awarded two points of salary credit. In the second and current year of the program, the question of reward and compensation for second year mentors became an issue, but was resolved when a negotiated stipend of $750 was agreed upon.

Thus far, the program for both years has cost the District $6,350. The Board, the Superintendent and the faculty believe it is an investment which reaps rewards in both performance and productivity.

(In the first year of the program: 9 teachers out of 20 were eligible for study credits at $81.50 per credit for a total of $1,468.

In the second year of the program: 11 teachers out of 28 were eligible for study credits at $86.90 per credit for a total of $1,911.80, and the four Second Year Mentor Teachers received a stipend of $750 for a total of $3,000.)

In essence, the program views the influx of new teachers as an opportunity to decrease isolation, increase teaching effectiveness in a collegial environment and provide for a diversity of roles with both extrinsic and intrinsic rewards.

Finally, the Mentor Program, if it is to be successful must continue to meet the two criteria which Linda Darling Hammond has proposed for all reforms, namely, greater teacher effectiveness with pupils and more satisfying careers for teachers.

Phyllis Berkin

Veteran teacher Marian Absgarten, left, shares her knowledge of guinea pigs with colleague Barbara McCue.

Putting experience to work

Mentor-teacher system flourishes in Scarsdale schools

By Joan Behrend
Staff Writer

First-grade teacher Barbara McCue had some serious questions about guinea pigs.

She was new to the district and had never raised the creatures in the classroom. Where and when should she buy them, she asked. Would her enthusiastic pupils at Greenacres School in Scarsdale be devastated if no babies were born?

Fortunately, the newcomer had a good relationship with veteran teacher Marian Absgarten, who was experienced in the ins and outs of raising guinea pigs.

The women are part of a mentor-teacher program designed to help ease new teachers' transition into the district by pairing them with veteran teachers. The mentor program is offered by the Scarsdale Teachers Institute, a professional

The guinea pig question was only one part of their discussion. Mrs. Absgarten also gave Mrs. McCue some pointers on her upcoming classroom evaluation and a healthy dose of encouragement.

"When you are new, you feel a little silly when you have questions," Mrs. Absgarten said over coffee in the teachers lounge while the vigorous sounds of aspiring orchestra players wafted [illegible]

"But you feel more comfortable when it's in a situation like this," she said.

Mrs. Absgarten is an official mentor to Mrs. McCue, who is one of 29 new teachers this year hired to fill the vacancies left by retiring teachers.

"Things come up," she told Mrs. McCue. "You have to handle all this."

Last year was not a good year for babies, Mrs. Absgarten said. The female guinea pig got fatter and fatter but apparently wasn't pregnant. And the chicken eggs the teacher had in her classroom did not hatch. Her pupils were pretty disappointed, but later one them told the class that his mother had had a miscarriage, she said.

Part of a growing movement

The mentor program at Scarsdale is one of many across the nation. It is part of a growing movement to create better professional conditions for new teachers, the need for which was stressed in the Carnegie Report last year. That report called for major school reforms and for giving teachers a bigger decision-making role in their schools.

"Mentoring is big these days," said Nancy Brennan of the state Department of Education's Office of Demonstration Programs. Her department administers a $4 million state grant for mentor/internship programs for beginning teachers only.

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No district in Westchester has adopted the state program, Ms. Brennan said. Instead, districts offer their own way of helping all teachers.

White Plains assigns outstanding teachers in math, computers and writing to work with other teachers, said Adele Wenz, district coordinator of staff development programs. Next year, the district will start a program in which retired teachers work with new teachers, she said.

New Rochelle plans to start a mentor program on a pilot basis next fall, said Mary Ellen Forte, director of the district's Staff Resource Center.

Helene Steinbuck, director of the Ardsley, Greenburgh and Elmsford Teaching Center, said Greenburgh and Elmsford were planning some version of a mentor program.

Using those who 'know the ropes'

In Scarsdale, "a major concern . . . is that we have a lot of people eligible for retirement. There is a quality that those years bring," said music teacher Trudy Moses, who coordinates the mentor program, now in its second year.

The district has had 60 retirements in the past two years, with 30 percent of its 320 teachers expected to retire in the next few years.

In a videotape the district put together about the program, Judith Schwartz, president of the Scarsdale Teachers Association and director of the 16-year-old institute, said, "By having a mentor, it cases the initial panic of a new school. It gives them the confidence to feel there is someone there to help."

"Although someone may have years of experience, they need to fit into a context. Someone who 'knows the ropes' can be extremely useful in shortcutting that time," Ms. Schwartz said.

"Instead of waiting six months or a year to really get to know the students," said Michael Menna, an elementary physical education teacher, "I think Gay (Reetz), as my mentor, has given me a lot of insight into the students, to become a little closer. I think it has made me a better teacher."

"It's not always easy to find someone to talk to. It's easy to be isolated in teaching," said Roberta Greller, a new skills teacher at the Junior High School with five years experience at Byram Hills. "If you're new, you don't know who's there to help."

Mentors are chosen by a committee of teachers and administrators who make matches on the basis of grade level, subject area or school. They arrange to meet for at least an hour a week and discuss curriculum issues, pupils and instructional problems. They even observe each other's classes. The entire relationship is confidential and may not be used in the teacher's evaluation.

In exchange for their participation, the mentor-teachers receive a credit that figures into their salary, as they would for any teacher center class. Of the 22 mentor-teachers in Scarsdale this year, four are serving a second year. The second-year mentor-teachers receive a small stipend. There is no shortage of teachers who want to be mentors, Ms. Moses said.

Benefits flow both ways

"I wanted to do a mentor because I was a visiting teacher [illegible] school in Chicago last year. It was very disconcerting, and being new is not the same as having one person you can relate to," said Chicago second-grade teacher Doris Mutter, who told the other mentors in the group, led by Columbia University assistant Professor Frances Bolin.

The new teachers are not the only ones who say they benefit.

"Teaching can be very lonely. You shut the door and it's just your class. And we're all so appreciative the opportunity to share. Part of being a mentor is into the need for professional growth. It's why veterans want to participate. It's stimulating," said Levitin, a skills teacher and learning disabilities teacher consultant in her second year of helping role.

Added first-grade teacher Mutter, "I think mentoring allowed professional leadership to emerge. It's a way to pass on legacy. Really there's no other vehicle to do this."

Everyone in the program emphasizes that advice is given as a peer in the strictest confidence.

But Ms. Steinbuck of Greenburgh's director warned that problems could arise if people don't know what their roles are.

For instance, one mentor-teacher [illegible] a teacher [illegible] the principal [illegible] the mentor-teacher [illegible] the principal [illegible] the mentor-teacher [illegible] the principal [illegible] Ms. Steinbuck said.

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